



CONFLICT IN PARADISE AND VICTIMISED WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT SHORT STORIES FROM SHAHNAZ BASHIR'S *SCATTERED SOULS*

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ABSTRACT



Kashmir is known as paradise on earth but due to the unresolved age-old Jammu and Kashmir conflict most of the families have lost a relative, friend, or neighbour in the violence. Ordinary, day-to-day life has been upended and degraded. Suspicion and fear continue to permeate the Kashmir valley. A knock on the door late at night sends spasms of anxiety through households. Psychological trauma related to the violence has been enormous as life itself is constantly under threat. But women, in Kashmir, have been the worst casualties of conflict. The Kashmiri women, over the last two and a half decades, have undergone terrible shocks, showered on them by the conflict. Their sons have been killed, their children orphaned, husbands disappeared, and thus are widowed. Their problems have multiplied over time. As the conflict raged on for more than twenty years, it has left them physically, socially, psychologically and economically distressed. They are the worst sufferers of the conflict and thus are the real victims. Naturally their sufferings have found a voice in the literary narratives of the state. One latest addition to such narratives is Shahnaz Bashir's short stories collection *Scattered Souls*.

The present paper is an attempt to analyse Shahnaz Bashir's treatment and depiction of Kashmiri women victimized by conflict in his select short stories, *Scattered Souls*.

Keywords: *Kashmir, Women, Conflict, Violence, Trauma, Victims, Sufferings, Scattered souls.*

Citation:

APA Rather, M.N. (2017) Conflict in Paradise and Victimized Women: An Analysis of Select Short Stories from Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 4(4), 118-123.

MLA Rather, Mohd Nageen. "Conflict in Paradise and Victimized Women: An Analysis of Select Short Stories from Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp.118-123.

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INTRODUCTION

The unresolved age-old Jammu & Kashmir conflict has resulted in bloodshed, killings, beatings, disappearances and other untold atrocities and miseries on the people including the misfortune that befell the women. Stress, trauma, depression, spontaneous abortions and miscarriages among women are common. The conflict has created a situation of tremendous fear and uncertainty in the lives of women in Kashmir. Every person in the valley of paradise has faced curfews, blackouts, cross firing on the streets and other forms of violence by the security forces. The popular saying by Mogul ruler Shah Jahan has switched to the opposite meaning of what he had said about Kashmir. His compliment "If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, and it is this" has become a day dream for the Kashmiris who are engulfed by the conflict. The human rights violations at the peak in the state demands that words like "Hell", "Bleeding valley" and the like have replaced the word "Paradise".

A study conducted in Kashmir by *Medicins Sans Frontiers* in 2006 says, "Like any other armed conflict situation, the continuous violent situation prevalent in Kashmir since 1989 has hit the Kashmiri women in every aspect, every day due to the ongoing-armed conflict women continue to suffer. She is a mother grieving for her missing or dead sons, a widow or a half widow fighting for her existence and the bringing up her children and a refugee to find shelter once displaced from her land". Kashmiris have started writing about themselves, telling their stories to the world through fiction and non-fiction. This is quite significant as it has introduced a local narrative into the discourse, reflecting the way Kashmiris themselves perceive their problem. Many literary narratives have depicted the plight of these women and their struggle to cope with life. But Shahnaz Bashir in his short story collection *Scattered Souls* has dealt with the issue in a realistic and unique way depicting how these women survive and how they are consumed by the social taboos and trauma. This powerful collection of stories focuses on life, loss and death in the Valley. Shahnaz Bashir turns the men and women into life-sized characters.

Set in the 1990s, the book's focal point is a time when the Indian army quashes a mass rebellion,

changing forever the lives of the residents in the Valley. A mother battles with feelings of anger towards her child born of rape. An ideal couple's blissful existence is shattered by a violent attack and other stories of miserable lives.

DISCUSSION

The thirteen stories in this collection are interconnected. Bashir is a skilled storyteller; his is the voice of the narrator with lived experience of the things that he writes about. Shahnaz Bashir's stories draw attention to the human cost of the conflict, and depicts the effects of the long-drawn conflict and militarization of Kashmir on its people especially women. The stories which depict the sufferings of women are the primary focus. When we look at the story '*Psychosis*' which is an extension of the preceding story *The Ex-Militant*, it depicts the tragic circumstances in which Sakina, the wife of ex-militant Ghulam Mohiudeen, finds herself during her husband's detention. She has to bear all kinds of humiliation at the hands of 'security' forces which culminate in a barbaric and heartless gang rape.

Sakeena, the protagonist of the story is raped one night in her shanty in Srinagar by five men, four of them soldiers of the Indian armed forces, even as "the whole neighbourhood seemed to be alert and listening" and "a contingent of troops cordoned the shanty off." Sakeena's husband, Ghulam Mohiudeen, an "ex-militant" who had "decided to strike out on his own and earn his livelihood by driving an auto rickshaw", went missing one evening. Sakeena had been expecting him back when the men barged into her house.

"The men didn't let Sakeena go for an hour. 'Your husband is with us so, take care', they said while leaving "(*Scattered Souls*:p-62).

This 'painful memory' later takes a 'human form' in her son Bilal as "she finds herself stuck in abysmal vortex of having to fight social stigma and ostracism on one hand and bringing up her illegitimate son on the other." (I.Malik:2016) The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder caused due to the rape sees Sakeena end up at the Government Psychiatric Diseases Hospital, "the only one of its kind in the valley of Kashmir", an institution "she has been visiting for the last six years." In the process she almost loses her



psychological poise and is forced to consult a psychiatrist. The trauma landed Sakina in trouble, suffering from cycloid psychosis, six years ago when she was admitted to this hospital for acute onset of confusion, delusions, hallucinations, altered behaviour, pan anxiety...with her bleeding, razor-nicked wrists- she had to be literally tied to her bed (SS.p-55).

Even in the hospital we get another glimpse of a mother victim of the conflict whose son has been killed in front of her. Here the writer suggests that wherever we go we will find a woman directly or indirectly affected by the conflict leading to her mental and psychological breakdown.

...[S]he has to struggle to queue up behind a morose old woman-whose son, Sakina learnt, has been killed in front of her eyes. (SS.p-53)

The story of Sakeena and Bilal and the constant stigma they face depicts a harsher reality of our society in which instead of sympathising with the victims, they are targeted and blamed for the sins they have never committed.

Professor William Baker states that "rape in Kashmir was not the result of a few undisciplined soldiers but an active strategy of the security forces to humiliate and intimidate the Kashmiri population." [Ranjan, Amit -447]

Sakeena's case reminds one of the painful rape cases of Kunanpashpora and Shopianin which the Kashmiri women were gang raped by the armed forces. Sakeena's husband Ghulam Mohiuddeen comes in her dreams, asking her to take care of herself and their daughter, Insha. Sakeena is convinced that she has been widowed, She shares this with the psychiatrist.

Are you sure he is not alive, that he won't return?" One hundred per cent. My heart says he is not alive. (SS.p-56).

Yet, there are two things the six-year-long treatment has not been able to cure Sakeena of. She says to the psychiatrist "But the smell of sperm barely leaves me. Even pleasantly scented things smell dirty to me." (SS.p 55) The other thing Sakeena finds unable to rid herself of is Bilal, the six-year-old son she refuses to call her son because he was

conceived of the rape. Though Bilal lives with Sakeena, she calls him "bastard", if only in her mind. She finds it "hard...to fight the urge to slap Bilal", she has beaten him, he was not even properly breastfed, and she had even tried killing him.

As she has beaten him most often just because of what he symbolizes. He is the human shape of a painful memory." (SS.p-63).

Yet, no matter how much Sakeena hates Bilal, she cannot seem to part with him, for he is a part of her, despite being "the human shape of a painful memory." As a child, Bilal was wary of his mother, but as he grows up, Sakeena starts loving him so much that "finding out that he skipped school would upset her greatly." The stories of Sakeena and Bilal speak of these numerous compromises the people in the Kashmir valley have to make. These compromises are often unspoken, accepted as a part of one's life. The half widows live a very miserable life torn between the despair and hope. As Butalia says, "Being without an earning member in the family meant they were forced to go out and seek work, but the moment they stepped out of the home, or stayed away from it, family members would accuse them of being women of bad character- a stigma that is difficult to live down, the more so when it is added to the stigma of widowhood." (2002).

They are more helpless and miserable than the widows because their life ends in a meaningless and endless waiting. Though Sakeena was coxsure of her husband's death yet she didn't want to marry. At the suggestion of the doctor for Sakeena to get remarried she replies, "I can't... I am still waiting for him SS. (p-66)"

Bashir has painted the picture of pain of the women in Kashmir. The conflict has rendered them useless and stripped them of their dignity. They are harassed and put to shame all the time by the security forces. There is such human rights violation in Kashmir that any son or the father with a living red heart in any corner of the world can be made to feel the pain. When Sakeena went to an army camp to get a clue of her missing husband, she is crushed to the core by the statements of the security forces at Sonawri camp after giving the bribe of five thousand to the guards for providing her the information for



her husband. She felt insulted when "the guards demanded that she sleep with them. Sakeena left crying" (SS.p-63).

Sakeena depicts the life of all the other half-widows of Kashmir. They have horrible past, painful present and no future at all. Their life is a pile of sufferings humiliations and hopelessness. They live a traumatic and rotten life. They are torn personalities. These half widows have to bear inhuman treatment while searching for their missing husbands. All the other aspects of life are completely suspended. They run from pillar to post and return without any trace.

There was no army camp, no interrogation centre. No jail that Sakeena didn't knock the doors of while searching for Ghulam Mohiuddeen. (SS.p- 62).

The end is never good for half widows and half orphans. The whole family has to suffer when a bread earner is lost. The children are forced by circumstances to take up the roles they are not fully prepared for. Extending the family struggle of the ex militant, in the story *Theft* Bashir has shown how the loss of a lone bread earner can be the cause of financial problems and push the incapable and yet not ready family members to do the menial jobs to survive. The women of Jammu & Kashmir in general and those of the valley of Kashmir in particular have been going through these traumatic conditions for the last more than two decades of conflict. The impact is huge and the society in Kashmir is scattered, leaving even children either orphaned or as household heads. After the disappearance of her father Ghulam Mohiuddeen and rape of her mother by security persons, Insha's struggles to lend meaning to her life as she tries to assert her existence in the face of social repression and distrust. Insha the daughter of Ghulam Mohiudeen and Sakina faces a lot of humiliation and disrespect and is even accused of theft while working as a salesgirl at a cosmetics shop. The conflict tore this family into pieces and made them to struggle in the midst of trauma.

The story '*The House*' honestly shows that conflict has the potential to disintegrate the most prosperous of households. A story which depicts the life and death of women Zareena. This story is also the reminder that whether indirectly or directly

women are the soft targets of the conflict. Either the women in Kashmir lose her father, husband, daughter or son, or is killed herself. In both the ways the women are the victims. Zareena was a humble hearted woman far better than her male counterpart:

Zareena kept the house lively. Unlike Farooq who wanted the house to be grand yet inhospitable. Zareena would try to draw people in (SS.p-134).

The conflict also has the potential to soften up and mellow down the most arrogant and conceited of individuals. This is illustrated through the falling apart of Farooq Ahmad Mir's household following his wife's death in army firing. Zareena is killed without any fault of her own. The bullets have not entered the body of Zareena only but have pierced her whole household in the other form. She was ruthlessly killed. She was a woman of a cordial temperament and a typical Kashmiri hospitable nature. But on a fateful day in May 1999 she was killed by troops in her compound:

...but before they could reach the gate, the Army was already inside the compound, furious and desperate. The troops fired indiscriminately and Zareena was hit. (SS.p-135).

The killing of a woman means killing of a whole family. The bereaved and affected members become a group of shattered personalities living in emotional vacuum. The conceited Farooq is miserably wounded by the loss of his wife. He is shorn of all the interest in life. The death of Zareena led to the disintegration of the family:

Without Zareena Farooq's family began to disintegrate and he grew more and more lonely, frustrated and deeply forlorn. He missed Zareena and would often stay indoors and cry secretly in her memory (SS.p-135).

Shahnaz Bashir brings out the physical as well as emotional torture a family has to undergo in the conflict honestly, with graphic details. Women primarily have been the most terribly injured party, in this decade's long conflict. Anywhere in the world, women suffer the most in any sort of conflict. Either she is war booty in the hands of belligerents, or she is a widow back at home. She suffers as a daughter,



mother, wife and sister, because most of the times she has to survive alone, with the loss of any support from her male counterpart. *'The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband'* is another tragic story of death and mourning. It is about Ayesha and her loving husband Tariq Zargar, a bank employee who is shot dead in LalChowk by security forces. His death ends their exemplary marital association. The life of Ayesha is torn into pieces and she becomes a spectacle of frustration and mental trauma. Ayesha is unable to overcome this shock and starts mimicking Tariq's diurnal routine, as she slips towards madness. The writer has once again delineated the picture of pain of a widow. Women lose their husbands without being a party to the political scuffle. The innocent Kashmiris are killed in cold blood especially the lone bread earners leaving the whole family in the vortex of hardships both psychological and financial. The narrator describes the exemplary relationship of the couple as:

I had never known as lovely a husband –wife pair as them. With time I was convinced that in that entire neighbourhood, they were an epitome of love (SS.p-170).

Bashir wants to convey that a husband to a woman is the most important person and the support to lean against in the ups and downs of life especially when the relationship is the paragon of love and mutual understanding. When Ayesha returns from Anantnag to Khan Sojourn Srinagar (where she and her husband stayed before and during his death) as her relative think that taking her to the location may serve as a soothing effect on her. But the women after the killing of her husband loses all the interests in life and remains indifferent to one and all:

Upon hearing about Ayesha's return, gradually the neighbours in Jawahar Nagar began to throng Khan Sojourns. But Ayesha was completely indifferent to everyone. (SS.p-181).

As the loss of husband has a profound effect on the mind of Ayesha, she gradually slips into the gorge of madness. Her frustration leads her to imitate the habits and other daily routines of her dead husband. She is an emotionally dead body. Her

trauma and the shock of her husband's loss is evident from her strange behaviour:

She stood on the veranda leaning on the railing over the grille the way Tariq did. Smoking a cigarette exactly in his style ... she greeted me in a man's tone... she paced the varendah limping like Tariq. The ladies quietly watched her crying behind her back.(SS.p-181).

Ayesha never recovers from the shock and the change of place from Anantnag to Sojourn Khan flat bore no fruits. She permanently remained mentally crippled and never recovered. She became a source of pity for one and all as the narrator says:

The ladies in the flat tried their best to keep her indoors because day by day Ayesha was turning into a spectacle for the neighbourhood. Another day I found her dressed in Tariq's navy-blue suit...wearing his pair of brogues, carrying his leather briefcase, limping down the lane for office (SS.p181-182).

In all the stories, Bashir has made artful use of the tragic happenings of last two and half decades, which now form a part of the Kashmiri collective conscience. In doing so, Bashir narrated a tale of a peculiarly placed hope in the face of extreme pain, sorrow and difficulty. In one way, it was like giving a voice to the numberless unvoiced whose stories died somewhere along the way as only reports of violence and politics come out into the world from Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

The select stories poignantly illustrates the plight of women victims the conflict has exacted-a mother whose son was killed in front of her eyes, of post-traumatic disorders, of fear psychosis, anxiety and depression, of shattered families and love stories, of shrieks and cries of a woman who has been gang raped by armed forces, of the tears of half-widows who hope against the hope for the return of their husbands, of enforced disappearances and killings. All these poignant incidents of pain and grief have been depicted in a brutally honest manner. The victimization of women is so grave and so common that every women- daughter, mother, sister, wife in Kashmir like Sakeena is made "to convince herself that this is not a hallucination" but



the real life filled and lived with insecurity and uncertainty because they are the worst causalities of conflict .

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